



The Hysteric's Revenge: French Women Writers at the Fin de Siecle

Rachel Mesch

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The Hysteric's Revenge considers fin-de-siecle French women writers in the context of prevailing cultural anxieties about female intellect. During the years that overlap between the fin-de-siecle and the Belle Epoque, women began to write in record numbers, due to a number of factors including educational reforms and demographic shifts. This trend terrified many male literary critics, who described it as the "crisis of women's writing" in a series of efforts to circumscribe the perceived problem. Such critics frequently linked women's writing to sexual depravity. According to popular medical theories, the fragile confluence of the female mind and body might steer the woman writer towards illicit sexual behavior when she exercised her intellect.

This book argues, however, that the fear of sexual abandon--though real--veiled an even more insidious fear: that women might be capable of intellectual equality with men and thus pose a threat to the most basic structures of French patriarchal society. In demonstrating the pervasiveness of this anxiety through analysis of nineteenth-century medical texts, literary criticism, and fiction, *The Hysteric's Revenge* brings into relief a critical relationship between the female mind and body that is essential to understanding the discursive position of the turn-of-the-century woman writer.

The novels presented here confront this mind/body problem through a wide variety of styles and genres that challenge conventional fin-de-siecle notions of femininity. From the compelling autobiography of Liane de Pougy--one of Paris's most renowned courtesans--to Colette's frank discussions of female pleasure in one of her early novels, to the violent creativity of Rachilde's androgynous heroine, Mesch demonstrates how both canonical and non-canonical writers promoted women's intellectual authority through the development of a sexual counter-discourse. In engaging the relationship between women's minds and bodies, these novels challenge the conclusions of a century of doctors who sought to prove a physiological basis for female intellectual inferiority. At the same time, they point the way towards later French feminists who sought to subvert patriarchal structures through literary explorations of sexuality.

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